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ABSTRACT

The value of experiential learning to augment formal instruction is discussed. The author posits that the social shift from rural to urban life has created a youth population richer in information than in experience. Experiential learning is a means to compensate for this imbalance. Examples are given of successful programs such as Foxfire, which incorporates the teaching of English with active and productive journalism. It is suggested that teacher educators can play a key role in facilitating experiential learning programs. (JD)

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: Its Meaning and Value

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: Its Meaning and Value

Background

During the Fall of 1979, the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in higher education published a report on its study of the education systems which "feed" students into higher education.[1] The report is noteworthy less for the new ground it breaks than for its confirmation of a series of major studies on secondary education published in the early 1970's.[2] Those consistent findings may be summarized simply enough. American education systems with the clear mission of preparing our youth to enter the adult world of scholarship, work and service are missing the mark, and missing it badly. Unwittingly, we are turning out young people, after thirteen years of schooling, who are overwhelmed by information, unable to synthesize it into an operating foundation for adult action serving self and others.

This is not an indictment of a conscious failure by education. Rather, it is a call for educators to recognize important changes in the society at large which alter significantly the assumptions upon which teaching processes and curricula are built. It is a plea for reform, the kind of reform so essential to survival in a society in which information is accruing at an exponential rate.

According to Coleman[3] when our public schools were put in place on a mass scale a little more than a century ago, they were serving a youth population that was "experience rich and information poor." Today, as a result of successive waves of social change from industrial, urban and technological advances, education serves a youth population which tends to be "information rich and experience poor." The implications of that shift raise profound questions about how we perceive the mission of "schooling" and the instructional processes required to

meet the learning needs of youth in light of this new reality.

Among the recommendations of the body of studies calling for reform in education is that schools must concern themselves not only with traditional classroom instruction but also with enriching the base of experience possessed by youth. Heretofore, the latter had not been a primary concern or interest of schooling. Formal education has tended to assume that family and community are responsible for providing that crucial aspect of development to youth. It is an assumption that cannot be supported currently nor is there reason to expect the societal forces that isolate and insulate youth from experience will disappear in the foreseeable future. Thus, if education is to be more complete and effective it is imperative that schools assure the development of youth through a balanced experiential and informational enrichment.

It is in this context that the meaning and value of experiential learning becomes imperative for education on the coming decades. Those who would become effective teachers need to become practitioners of experience-based instruction in appripriate mix with traditional classroom pedagogy. This is, in fact, a need that cuts across all subject areas and levels of education. The challenge for education in 1880 was to bring information about the world beyond community and region into the active consciousness of a competent but culturally isolated population. 1980 brings a new challenge which is to enable a population innundated by information, instantly transmitted worldwide, to function competently as effective individuals and community members. Applied concepts of experiential learning, made integral to schooling, hold promise for significant contribution in meeting that challenge.

Characterizing Experiential Learning

Instructional theory deals with the process of sequencing activities, designed and managed by a teacher, that will produce conditions in which the phenomenon of learning predictably takes place. Two primary patterns generally are encompassed by instructional theory: (1) those activities that rely on symbolic media for the transference and assimilation of information; and, (2) those activities that rely on action in a situation of real consequence to produce experience(the observed cause-effect from action).

Information assimilation has been the dominant pattern for instruction in formal schooling, particularly above the primary grades. Experiential learning has been the dominant instructional mode in the world of work. Seldom have the two been blended into an interacting whole in any instructional endeavor; but when attempted the results have indeed been impressive. The most conspicuous example was the change in approach to medical education in the late 19th century. which led to the requirement for interweaving the two patterns in accredited medical schools. Thus, graduate professional education today, influenced by that success, offers the most consistent pattern of an appropriate mix of experiential learning and information assimilation and is suggestive of what could be developed throughout all levels of the educational enterprise.

The medium of information assimilation is symbolic language-written, spoken, numerical, visual, graphic, formular. Experiential learning uses reality as its essential medium; the reality of natural, built, social and cultural environments. Thus, the medium of each tends to characterize the one pattern as essentially a passive mode and the other as an active mode of instruction. Medium alone cannot be the

determiner, however, of the difference between the two patterns of instruction. One teaches Shakespeare experientially by performing the play, which is an active use of a symbolic medium. One teaches in the outdoors using information assimilation by lecturing to students assembled in a glen, which is a passive use of natural environment.

It is by directly comparing the sequential flow of learning activities between these two patterns of instruction that one most clearly characterizes each. The sequencing process given below is Coleman's comparison.[4]

	Information Assimilation	Experiential Learning
Step 1.	Introduction of a general principle as information in symbolic medium form.	A reality situation is introduced which requires learner to act on and observe the effect of action in a specific circumstance.
Step 2.	Learner assimilates and organizes information presented to demonstrate in symbolic language understanding of the principle.	Learner demonstrates understanding of the specific cause/effect of an action by acting successfully in a nearly identical situation.
Step 3.	Learner infers from understanding of the general principle to a particular application expressed symbilically.	Learner extends understanding of specific cause/effect observed through action to varied conditions and circumstances toward formation of a generalization out of a series of specific actions.
Step 4.	Learner transfers understanding of general principle and its symbolic summary, simulation of action or controlled laboratory setting.	Learner applies generalization of cause/effect principle through action in a new or more complex situation and circumstance.
Step 5.	Learner applies assimilated information by acting in a reality situation.	Learner transfers generalization from observed cause/effect of actions into an information medium for self or other's reference.

This sequential comparison reveals the two primary patterns of instruction to be opposite sides of the same coin. The one begins with introduction of a general principle and moves sequentially to applied specific action, while the other begins with specific action in a given situation and moves in sequential steps to formation of a generalization that is remembered and/or recorded as information. Also revealed is inherent potential for compatible and complimentary interaction between the two operating as a whole theory of instruction appropriate for most curricular areas. They are not separate processes and should not be set in competition with each other.

Value of Experiential Learning

When appropriately mixed with traditional classroom instructional activities at each level of schooling, experiential learning represents a ready response by educators to the new challenges articulated in recent studies. It can help restore balance to the total developmental needs of youth by enriching their real world experience base in pace with their assimilation of information. It can help penetrate the barriers of isolation and insulation by involving youth in their communities in worthy projects and activities. It can help motivate learners by demonstrating to them the utility of education in direct action terms. It can also help them synthesize their academic competence as it evolves by providing reality referencing. Finally, it provides an opportunity for involvement that assists learners in making the transition from childhood to adulthood in a more effective manner.

These are not wistful claims since they are being demonstrated through successful experiential learning projects throughout the United States. Programs utilizing the out-of-doors, environmental studies and Outward Bound are prominent among them. So, too, are educational

programs that make use of community social profiles, oral history, Walkabout, creative and peak experiences in the visual and performing arts, executive interns, instruction drama, youth managed enterprise, and many more. All share a common reliance on experiential learning as the primary mode of instruction.

An especially successful program in this field is the cultural journalism project as originated and modeled by Foxfire in the mountains of northern Georgia. A brief overview of Foxfire will serve to exemplify the potential of experiential learning.

The project began as a concept for teaching English to high school students. Its instructional vehicle is a continually journalistic exploration of folk culture in the Southern Appalachians. This mode of instruction requires that students become discoverers, reporters, archivers and publishers of material pertaining to that culture. A tangible product of the project is a nationally marketed quarterly magazine that has been well received. However, the primary instructional goal is to teach English in an active and compelling manner, and to make learning a pursuit of consequence in the students' lives. This allows them to relate to and function in the adult world.

Foxfire magazine is currently distributed to some 10,000 subscribers nationally and internationally each quarter. Collections from the magazine have been published in a series of five major books by Anchor-Doubleday. Today, Foxfire is an integral part of a public consolidated high school in rural Georgia. Participating students are not those labeled as gifted and talented. They are ordinary mountain community students who happen to live in Rabun County. Approximately 120 of them are involved in Foxfire each semester. Their success has spawned more than 150 similar programs in schools around the nation and in countries such as Australia.

In August, 1979, the Foxfire staff and students sponsored the first national conference on cultural journalism that drew some 300 teachers and students to St. Louis. This resulted from one teacher deciding to teach English experientially with ninth and tenth graders who were less than excited with the subject in general.

The educational value of Foxfire is clear and undeniable. English has become a working tool for students rather than a subject to be tolerated. They learned to use that tool well enough to have their skill recognized by the adult world, that buys and reads Foxfire publications. Further, they functioned as a productive part of the adult world in their own community and are valued members of it as a result. Perhaps, most importantly each student involved with Foxfire has come to sense a worth within, that each is competent and capable of functioning in the world into which they will soon enter.

Shop students who build an airplane each year in Wisconsin, rather than repetitively cutting and finishing little pig cutting boards experience similar educational and personal growth. Those in Vermont who propose, plan, fund, conduct and publish accounts of travel to other parts of the country report learning and growth on the same order. Students in California who learn Botany by living in Luther Burbank's home and tending his gardens share in this reality. No matter the context or vehicle employed, learners who have an opportunity to be participants in well planned and managed experiential learning programs benefit in ways that cannot be duplicated in the traditional classroom.

Focus on Experiential Learning

Despite a clear and consistent body of evidence that experiential learning should become an integral part of instruction in education, its use remains uncertain.

Traditional educators tend to suspect its "rigor" and worry about

its "measureability" in academic terms and for obvious reasons find it foreign to their own background and training. Educational administrators in the public schools tend to be overly concerned with the maintenance of "control" and therefore tend to stifle experientially based projects. The general public often sees in experiential education a threat to the custodial functions they place on the public schools.

Generally, teacher education institutions have not introduced experiential learning to undergraduates as a significant part of instructional theory applicable to schooling, and, thus, have neither prepared prospective educators to be open to the concept nor competent in its operation.

Confronted by such an array of institutional barriers, practitioners of experiential learning have not always been their own best advocates. They have frequently tended to operate in isolation from the traditional classroom. It is not unusual to find a teacher using the natural environment for experienced-based instruction while not recognising the commonality shared with a fellow teacher in the same school who uses the built environment. This often occurs because practitioners tend to identify with and value the vehicle or medium above instructional process. Similarly, they tend to be wary of tying their programs closely to traditional academic programs. Too many value the experience for itself, rather than for its contribution to pre-set learning objectives. Given a general lack of receptivity, the experiential learning leader in a formal school setting tends to be overly concerned with the survival of the program and therefore seldom shares from a collaborative perspective.

To a marked degree, a significant future for experiential learning rests on the amelioration of fears and narrow vision held by both traditionalists and advocates. Facilitating this process can be the key role played by teacher educators. They are in a position to take the lead in bring focus on the appropriate mixing of information assimilation and experiential learning, as is recommended by all the national studies that have examined the need for educational reform over the past decade. They are most able to teach to the implications for curricula and instructional changes found in those studies.

Teacher education institutions can also provide the crucial platform for bringing scholars and practitioners, traditionalists and innovators into accomodation with one another with the goal of effecting in revolutionary and evolutionary ways the reforms so necessary. Such a focus can be part of a creative and stimulating future for teacher education and education in general.

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